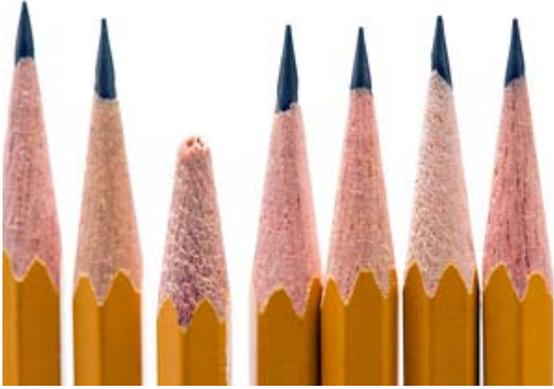


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The Imperfect Balance Between Work and Life

by Rosabeth Moss Kanter

You *can* have it all. It just won't all be perfect.

After years of observing individual struggles to achieve work-life balance — and of enlightened companies to provide it — I've concluded that one major hurdle is artificial images of perfection. Certainly institutional structures don't make it easy to balance work and the rest of life. This is especially true in the U.S., where vacations are short, sabbaticals are rare, school schedules don't align with office hours, and working parents cobble together their own costly support systems. But in addition, American culture holds up myths of perfection — the perfect body, the perfect job, the perfect child, the perfect lawn — that consume time, money, and attention. This plagues everyone, but especially women who are candidates for high-powered careers.

Some pundits posit a polarizing argument about the prospects for work-life integration between Princeton's Anne-Marie Slaughter and Facebook's Sheryl Sandberg. Slaughter went public with her decision to leave a top-ranking U.S. State Department job to return to academia and her family of teenagers because, she indicated [in an article in *The Atlantic*](#), women simply can't have it all. She thereby imposed on everyone her experience in a high-burnout job demanding extensive international travel and a commute between Washington and New Jersey. Not exactly your typical job. In contrast, Sandberg, whose own career as Facebook chief operating officer is presumably pretty demanding itself, has used numerous public speeches to urge young women to keep their ambitions high and [find a job they love before they have children](#), so they will want to keep the job while growing the family.

I'm with Sandberg in seeking a guilt-free zone where people have more choices and don't turn trade-offs into insurmountable obstacles. One way to do this is to stop seeking perfection and settle for good-enough, or even not-at-all. Far be it for me to argue against high standards. But the leaders I know who integrate work and life particularly happily have chosen to let a few things slip here and there in order to focus on the important things. They pick their areas of excellence and ignore others. A woman executive who doesn't drink coffee never learned how to make it, thus saving many hours of time over the years while never being forced into coffee-service role early in her career. At home she talked to her children while someone else made the coffee.

Perfection myths have a do-it-yourself flavor. DIY might work well for hobbies, but for everything else, successful work-life integrators delegate like crazy, resources permitting. Arlie Hochschild's book *The Outsourced Self* decries paying for services like dog-walking or babysitting (plus some California specials like dream-finders) but except for the most basic human interactions, like a family member in the hospital, or strategic decisions only you can make, why not find or hire others who specialize in that service and can fill gaps? Only subsistence farmers make everything themselves. The division of labor built modern society.

Sometimes what is assumed to constitute perfection can be counter-productive. Babies kept in sterile environments without exposure to a little dirt seem to get more illnesses as adults. Co-workers who bond with one another over after-hours beer and pizza do not necessarily form better teams, but they pressure others to think so. Companies that delay a product launch until every detail is perfected do not necessarily have better-received products; they can miss market timing and the chance to get user feedback to make rapid adjustments.

Lack of perfection has an honorable tradition in some religions. Flaws are built into Amish quilts, for example, out of the belief that only God can make things perfect. Does that kind of belief system make it easier to accept limitations and tradeoffs? "The choice to do anything doesn't mean you can do everything," said **Debra Spar**, president of Barnard College and my former HBS colleague, in response to Slaughter's article.

For those who get over the perfection trap, there are numerous tricks to find more time and thus more balance. Robert Pozen, chairman of mutual fund company MFS who also teaches at HBS, has written *Extreme Productivity* to show how focus and a stream of small wins can make major achievements possible. In her book *Sleeping with your Smartphone* (not a how-to guide) Leslie Perlow shows **the virtues of device-free time** in a consulting firm, when team members have the freedom not to respond.

A European executive takes six weeks of vacation in the U.S. with his family while activities continue at his firm, but he's willing to live with temporary discomfort. "I'm micromanaging from afar, not always the best solution, but that's what comes with trying to do it all," he said in a cheerful email.

"Best is the enemy of good," it's often said. A cultural shift to get out of the perfection trap can also free up time to work on the bigger changes needed to bring work and life into better alignment.



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